

Symbolisation in Malay: Evidence in Genre and Lexicon.

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1. Introduction

The Malay culture of obedience and benevolence though not always true in practice could still be traced in the language behaviour of the Malay speech community. The verbal style of meaning one's intention in language could reflect the cultural trait within a particular language. As the Malays are polite in general, their politeness could be traced in their verbal communication. A Malay speaker usually would avoid using the authentic personal pronoun *Aku*¹ 'I' except when conversing with very good friends and even parents seldom use this pronoun with their children unless they are angry. Malay speakers would also prefer to speak their minds in an indirect manner. This implicit way of meaning one's intention could be found in Asmah (1992) where four types of indirect communication in Malay are outlined.

The phrase *kurang ajar* which literally or at surface meaning means lack tutoring suffices to illustrate symbolic meaning in Malay. This phrase is actually understood as rude or crude. No single Malay speaker would like to be associated with this phrase as it is directly associated with its symbolic sense and instantaneously understood upon its usage either in written or spoken. This form of symbolic meaning can be regarded as the semantics of a particular indirect speech act in Malay which could be an important source of insight into communicative routines (cf. Wierzbicka 1985) of Malay culture.

¹ *Aku* is a T form first person pronoun. The Malays would usually employ *saya* a V form first person pronoun in daily communication. But *aku* can also denote a neutral sense because it is used in the prayers among Malay muslims as *aku* is the conventional pronoun when communicating with God. In my recent visit to Sabah, I found out that '*Aku*' is commonly used among speakers regardless of age and race (Chinese-Malay) in certain areas in Sabah.

2. Symbolic Meanings in Malay Culture and Discourse

In this section I shall look at pantun as an indirect form of communication in Malay. In its most basic form the pantun is a four-line verse, where each line is composed of eight to twelve syllables, usually about four or five words (Muhammad Haji Salleh 1991:29). Pantun is fully justified to be an authentic representation of Malay mentality, which contains the Malay emic viewpoint as stated by Azhar Simin in Zulkifley Hamid (1994). According to Asmah (1992:179) the Malay pantun is a microcosm of a typical social communication in Malay life and the first two stanzas represent the phatic communion whereas the last two are the actual communication. Asmah also points out :

...if the pantun is a microcosm of Malay communication, then it is an example par excellence in the use of imagery in communication. When a Malay communicates in the pantun form he can be said to be at the height of his finesse and decorum.

In communication, the pantun is used as a form of communication in formal propositions for marriage, and engagement and wedding ceremonies. It is in such events that directness is greatly shunned and indirectness rules the day. (1992:180)

The authenticity of pantun is further acknowledged by Daillie when he says the Malay pantun is regarded as a must in any form of Malay Studies as, "They are probably as old as the language itself and yet still alive - a perfect mirror of the Malay world as a whole, and of the Malay soul." (Daillie 1988:3). He also maintains that :

"The Malay pantun...is an epitome of life and a universe in a grain of sand. It carries within itself all the elements of the Malay man's life [especially in the first two lines, see Daillie 1989]...it expresses his customs and traditions, wisdom, beliefs and feelings of all sorts, his love of man, woman and God." (Daillie 1988: 6)

In certain delicate facets of human endeavour, symbolic meanings become the norm of communication. This has been observed by Tham (1977:18):

A most pervasive character of Malay is the symbolic use of language...The process may be summarised in the following way: linguistic categories are associated with a set of standard or surface meanings but this set of standard meanings signals its associated symbolic meanings. However, the categories used and their ecological connexions are localized and culturally defined.

In settings such as courtship and marriage for example, words are more symbolic as in *menengok*, though it literally means 'watching', it is actually the tradition of elders viewing a potential bride (Wazir Jahan Karim 1990:25). The love of a couple could be depicted and expressed in a pantun such as below (Hamilton 1982:52-3):

Hilang dadu di dalam dadih,	Within the curds the dice are lost,
Dadih bercampur minyak lada.	Sweet curds with oil of pepper fixed.
Hilang malu kerana kasih,	Fond love my sense of shame has lost,
Rindu hati bercampur gila.	For love was e'er with madness mixed.

Within the above quatrain, a clearer representation of Malay meaning is visible. The first two lines are *pembayang* described by Wazir (1990) as 'concealed meaning usually contain metaphoric symbolic statements' followed by the actual message intended by the conveyer. This is an ontological manifestation of symbolic meaning existing within the Malay speech community. According to Benjamin the objective articulation of one's thought is not only tedious but could expose one to be controlled by other individuals as to how one should express one's thought thus it is a tendency for speakers to "cleave to the deeper and more personal satisfaction of holding their thoughts in the condensed, non-articulated, symbolic forms to which they have instantaneous (because non-linerised) access, and which are truly private." (1983:7). To illuminate this point further, it would be necessary to quote the process of communication between two parties in *merisik*, an informal visit by a middle-aged female

representative of the man's family to explore the possibility of marriage proposal to a prospective bride's parent, outlined by Sweeney (1987:150):

The visitor will remark that an important wish/matter has brought her here (Datang ini ada hajat besar, or Inipun ada hal maka datang). The following exchange will involve various allusions to flowers (the girl) and bees (the boy). Traditionally this might include the trading of **pantun**. The visitor may say that she hears there is a flower blossoming in this house. If it has no owner, one would wish to pluck it. (Katanya di rumah ini ada pula bunga yang sedang kembang. Kalau belum ada tuannya ingin pula hati 'tu nak menyuntingnya)...She may then use another allusion. For example, "If one has a bird, one should find a cage for it; it will appear radiant only when hung under the eaves" (Kalau ada burung 'tu elok dicarikan sangkarnya, barulah berseri kalau disangkutkan di tepi cucuran atap)...(emphasis provided)

The above quotation suggests a symbolic mode in Malay semantics and pragmatics. It also provides support to Asmah's explanation (1992:176) for the first type of indirectness in Malay communication as 'Beating About the Bush (B.A.B.). In addition to the quatrain and the verbal discourse recorded, the Malay literary and oral traditions have also shown immensely that symbolic meaning is the norm of intracommunication in Malay society. Such symbolic mode of meaning is found from the allegories in Malay Annals or *Sejarah Melayu* where the rulers are criticised subtly as one's life is at stake if the king or Sultan is confronted head-on. More obvious symbolisation can be easily traced from the Malay stories such as *Musang Berjanggut* and *Pak Pandir* from which *pandir* in the latter is literally adapted into the Malay lexicon to mean one's simple-mindedness. Subtler symbolism is also detected in *Tikus Rahmat*, *Matinya Seorang Patriot* and *Tok Guru*.

3. Rhyme in Malay Genre

The perplexity of rhyme in semantics is an indicator for sound-meaning association. In Malay, rhyme is properly capitalised in verbal communication.

The symbolic-semantic transfiguration of rhyme can be easily found in some Malay genres. The most salient rhyme can be traced in *peribahasa* the Malay maxims and again in *pantun* the Malay quatrains. Rhyme is semantically perceived as an euphemistic and diaphoric mode for expressing one's intention. Diaphor is a process where metaphoric transformation takes place and the semantic movement of diaphor is toward the purely nonreferential irrational pole of language, which according to Wheelwright (in Brown 1983:27-29) is also the more intuitive and affective resources of verbal music. By capitalising on rhyme in general the phonetic harmonics of speech sounds and the diaphoric semantics in Malay is achieved. Take the saying, *Ada beras semuanya deras; Ada padi semuanya jadi*, (money makes the world go round) for instance, the rhyming effect of the saying provides an additional degree of convincing power to the ears by means of diaphoric transfiguration. This is what I call the positive semantic effect of rhyme in Malay poetics. I think it is a rich source of symbolic-semantic transfiguration and pragmatics in Malay communication. Other examples in this sound Malay proverbs are:

Orang berdendang di pentasnya, orang beraja di hatinya.

On his own couch a man may sing: In his own heart a man is king.

Ada hujan ada panas, ada hari boleh balas.

There is fine as well as wet: Some day I'll get even yet.

Kalau tiada rial di pinggang, sahabat yang rapat menjadi renggang.

When your waistbelt lacks subsistence, Close friends even, keep their distance.

Orang baharu kaya jangan dihutang, orang baharu nikah jangan ditandang.

From the newly rich don't seek a boon or visit a man on his honeymoon.

Raja adil raja disembah, raja zalim raja disanggah.

To obey the law is right; Against injustice we should fight.

(Hamilton 1987)

The rhyming pattern is also obvious in *pantun*. I am limiting my examples to the basic four-line Malay *pantun*. The end rhymes between the first and third; second and fourth lines are a must in a Malay *pantun*. These poetic techniques, as observed by Muhammad (1991:34), bring us deeper into the world of subtle emotions, traditional sensitivity to words, sounds, tones and their magical connotations which in turn supply a psychological attraction for the reader or listener who needs a world that provide a meaning, a wholeness and in which all things finally fall into place.² These harmonious rhyming alternations are pragmatically regarded as a phonesthetic mode of communication that enable one to express various intentions diaphorically in different settings. Typically *pantun* reflects the creativity and polite demeanour of the Malays in meaning one's intention. The sound meaning of the *pantun* are clearly visible in these quatrains (Hamilton 1982):

Singapura dilanggar todak,	When Singapore the swordfish harried,
Alah berkubu batang pisang.	By plantain stems men stood their ground.
Orang tua berlaki budak,	When age to callow youth is married,
Bagai bulan dipagar bintang.	'Tis like moon with stars around.

Hendak gugur, gugurlah nangka,	Fall, jackfruit, fall if so you will,
Jangan menimpa si dahan pauh.	But not on mango branches pray!
Hendak tidur, tidurlah mata,	Close, sleepy eyes, so you be still,
Jangan dikenang orang yang jauh.	And dwell not on those far away.

Kalau roboh kota Melaka,	Should Malacca's fort be broken,
Papan di Jawa saya dirikan.	Log planks I'll raise on Javan land.
Kalau sungguh bagai dikata,	If it is the truth you've spoken,
Nyawa di badan saya serahkan.	My soul and body's in your hand.

Both *pantun* and *peribahasa* carry certain particular semantic traits of expressive language outlined by Wheelwright (Brown 1983:23-4), namely referential congruity and assertorial lightness. Both genres exhibit referential congruity as

²According to Benjamin there is a poetic tendency in speech which is matched by what Gell (1979 in Benjamin 1983) calls the 'poem'-like properties of the language itself. For a discussion on internal rhyming in *pantun* see Muhammad 1991:37-8

they accommodate an intimate connection between what is said and the way of saying it and according to Brown (ibid.:23) any rewording, paraphrase, or translation could at best only approximate the sense of the original. Under assertorial lightness both genres especially peribahasa elicited poetic assertions which tend to be gentle, tentative, or conjectural or courting reality rather than assaulting it (ibid.:24-5). Peribahasa and pantun could well be a 'language poem' genre - to use Benjamin's term (1983) in Malay. This particular genre according to Benjamin (ibid.) has an inherent link of lexical meanings triggered by the homophony or near-homophony of unrelated words.

By exploring pantun and peribahasa I provide an account of implicit meaning in Malay which I think could offer a new outlook to symbolic semantics in Malay. I now proceed to sound symbolism in the remainder of this paper.

4. Phonetic Symbolism in Malay Lexicon

Sound symbolism or phonetic symbolism used to be a marginal linguistic notion of sound-meaning relationship but has now received much interest from linguists. The most recent development in the study of linguistic iconicity is the collections of papers presented at the 15th International Congress of Linguistics at Université of Laval published in *Journal of Pragmatics* 1994 Vol. 22, No. 1. The theme in the collection deals with cognitive metaphor and iconicity of which the latter is the focus.

Iconicity in language according to Benjamin (1993:386) may be phonetic or grammatical, *a priori* and *a posteriori*. In his anthropological analysis on Temiar grammar, Benjamin takes on Leach's position that 'phonemic patterning may have a semantic significance.' and argues that iconicity is something **felt** rather than known (1983:6). I shall examine the *a priori* phonetic iconicity in Malay and I propose to include Jespersen's symbolic i into Malay.

In Jespersen's article 'Symbolic Value of Vowel i' (1933 and 1922) a large number of languages (but Malay) are examined to suggest that i as a vowel suggests smallness, weakness or/and triviality. Many of the Malay lexicon are *believed to be sound symbolic and therefore contain the invariant meanings of small, weak and trivial*. Sound as the semantic make-up of a word is studied paradigmatically, I shall list some Malay lexicon marked with the vowel [i] which significantly exhibit at least one of the sound-symbolic traits as pointed out by Jespersen. (All the registers are taken from **Kamus Dewan** 1989, Wilkinson, R.J. 1955 and Winstedt, R.O. 1957[60]).

jinjit (carry in the fingers)

percik (sprinkle)

cubit (pinch)

renjis (sprinkle)

cilik (wee)

titis (dribblets)

titik (drops)

kecil (small)

sipi (off the centre)

lidi (veins of coconut-fronds)

gerimis (drizzling)

bintil (heat-spot)

seni (fine) *

bintik (spot)

garis (line)

kerit (nibble)

In addition to the data above, I shall contrast the i-lexicon with lexicon which have the opposite designation i.e. 'small' as opposed to 'big'. One should be able to observe a non-i-lexicon in the 'big' paradigm. Below are a contrast of select Malay i-lexicon and the non-i-lexicon. The paradigms designate two opposing semantic denotation or connotation namely the 'lesser' versus the 'larger'.

takik (to nick or tap)

bisik (whisper)

pasir (sand)

bilik (room)

biji (seed)

cubit (pinch)

gilap (polish)

tebang (to chop)

sebut (say)

batu (stones)

rumah (house)

buah (fruit)

genggam (grasp in fist)

gosok (wipe)

tipis (thin)	lebat (dense, thick)
nipis (thin)	tebal (thick)
cair (watery)	pekak (thick of liquid)
gigit (bite)	baham (guzzle)
pekik (scream)	lolong (howl)
minat (interest)	suka (liking)
silap (mistake)	salah (error)
petik (pluck)	cabut (uproot)
jari (finger)	tapak (palm)
adik (younger sibling)	kakak (elder female sibling)
adik (younger sibling)	abang (elder male sibling)
guris (scratch)	koyak, robek (torn)
kikis (scrape)	korek (dig)
tepis (push aside)	tolak (shove off)
kecil (small)	besar (big)
titi (small bridge)	jambatan (bridge with rail)
garisan (line)	jaluran (stripe)
tangkai (twig)	batang (trunk)
misai (mustache)	janggut (beard)

Based on the paradigms above, the vowel [i] in Malay is a sound-symbolic vowel that suggests smallness, weakness or triviality.³ I would also like to reiterate Benjamin who has pointed out that:

“...an iconic form is felt to be peculiarly appropriate to a particular meaning - even though most speakers cannot begin to identify that meaning in any explicit way...The experience of speaking a language builds up inchoate but definite expectations in one's mind as to the appropriateness of particular phonetic articulations to particular intended meanings; (1983:6-7).

³ Interestingly Wijeyewardene (1968) reports that the /ii/ prefix of Northern Thailand is found in address before the names of younger females and before the names of certain animals except prawn and tadpole. The animals reported are relatively small creatures (ibid.: 80) and some are even considered as foolish (ibid.: 83). On the other hand, Fonagy (1991:511) includes the metaphoric ideation of small as one of the semantic areas for /i/ and in one of his earlier experiments 88 percent of his Hungarian subjects (children and adults) ranked /i/ as smaller than /u/ (Fonagy 1963 in Jakobson and Waugh 1987:191). In another experiment, all of Sapir's subjects have chosen *li* to *la* and *law* as the imaginary signifier for the smallest table in a number of times (Sapir 1927 in Jakobson and Waugh 1987:188).

It is precisely based on the basis above I propose this phonetic symbolism for the high-front vowel in Malay. A more constrained comparison can be seen in the minimal pair contrasts in the data below.

puteri (princess)	putera (prince)
bendahari (treasurer)	bendahara (prime minister)
negeri (state)	negara (country)
ini (this)	itu (that)
sini (here)	sana (there)
angkat (lift light objects)	angkat (carry)
angkit (lift light objects)	angkut (drag)
lekit (beginning to stick)	lekat (adhere or fixed)
cicit (great grandchildren)	cucu (grandchildren)
ungkit (reiterate)	ungkat (drag up the past)
bengkik (swollen)	bengkak (swollen)
hanyir (stinking)	hanyur (very stinking)
pancit (ermit in thin stream)	pancut (squirt out)
jinjing (dangling in hand)	junjung (carry on head)
gigil (shivering)	gogoh (quiver)

Though some of the lexicon above are of Sanskrit origins the symbolic [i] still prevails as a comparison between two Sanskrit lexicon shows the vowel [i] is of a lesser significance as in *puteri* (princess) versus *putera* (prince). The latter word symbol generally occupies a higher ranking in terms of monarchic hierarchy or a stronger/larger proportion in physical trait.

Of course by pointing out that there are also many other i marked-lexicon which do not signify smallness one could rule out the idea of phonetic symbolism. But one should bear in mind that the symbolic [i] is one of the possible means of meaning in the realm of symbolism and it should not be taken as an absolute yes-no linguistic notion.⁴

⁴ ...linguists will have to abandon the principle of all-or-none, categoriality. either-or, sameness vs. difference for the lexicon, since it is ruled by continua, by degrees, by both-and... This means that iconicity itself is not an all-or-one; it defines a synchronic and diachronic continuum... And this

5. Implication

To reinforce symbolic semantics in Malay, I shall relate the sound symbolic Malay lexicon to language learning. In language pedagogy the learning and recalling of lexicon can capitalise on the 'bath-tub effect' of language learning. This effect was first pointed out by Brown and McNeill (1966 in Aitchison 1990:119) as the psychological phenomenon where people tend to recall the beginnings and ends of words better than the middles. This psychological bias of human memory as manifested in the bath-tub effect has been proven by Browman who studied 500 tip of the tongue guesses and confirmed that beginnings and ends of words are more prominent in storage and more likely to be remembered (ibid:121). This particular learning behaviour can be manipulated in first and second language learning of phonesthematic word symbols.⁵

Parallel to this learning tendency, the sound symbolic Malay lexicon marked with the vowel *i* for example, could be incorporated into the learners' perception of lexical meaning and the understanding of related words in a lexical paradigm. Consequently, this factor could provide a linguistic basis for designing language evaluation in language education. For instance this principle can be used to select more effective distractions of homonyms and synonyms in a diagnostic test that measures one's proficiency in Malay.

The *i*-marked lexicon could also be a valuable source of linguistic inventory. Words required for denoting smallness may it be an object, a situation or a

continuum is correlated with...the continua of polysemy, semantic compositionality, similarity, and relatedness...' (Waugh 1994:66). I would also like to reiterate the fact that the word **big** was formerly *bugge* (Ayto 1990: 62).

⁵ There are many phonesthematic Malay lexicons which could capitalise on the bath-tub effect in learning. For more details on recurrent Malay Submorphemes which exemplify phonesthematic Malay lexicon one can refer to McCune 1985; and Blust 1988 for root and consonant symbolism.

movement could now be coined by incorporating [i] as the symbolic pointer for smallness. One could perhaps provide a sound symbolic 'big-small' semantic demarcation to Malay lexicon :

cekit (take a little at a time)	cekut a pinch ([?more] held between thumb and three finger)
bintit (spot)	bintat ([?bigger] heat-spot)
kedikit (stingy)	kedekut ([?more] stingy)
jeriji (trellis)	jeruji ([?larger] lattice)
benjil (bumpy of forehead)	benjol ([?more] bumpy of forehead)
kedekit ([?less] stingy)	kedekut (stingy)

Though there is no explicit variation in denotation for these paradigms, semantically one could perhaps designate the i-marked lexicon to denote a smaller criterion and relegate the non-i-lexicon for the larger counterpart. There is no reason to doubt the vowel i as the semantic element to mean 'small' in Malay and to forsake such 'sound' meaning for borrowed ones which might consequently give rise to language shift and even language attrition.⁶

Another interesting aspect of this symbolic [i] is its applicability to the understanding of certain Malay sayings. The Malay proverb, *burung pipit sama burung enggang (mana boleh sama terbang)* or *yang pipit sama dengan pipit juga, yang enggang sama dengan enggang juga* 'Birds of a feather flock together: rich poor do not forgather' (Hamilton 1987:22) has an obvious contrast between the symbolic [i] with [a] when the two birds of the proverbs are examined. *Pipit* (sparrow) and *enggang* (hornbill) both symbolise people of different social stratum. While the upper class are represented by *enggang* a bigger species of bird the lower class are deemed as *pipit* a smaller bird

⁶ Recently, a Malaysian writer has observed the advent of language pollution in Malay, "I remember one hyperactive *kritikus* [critic] in an article on drama trying to pumb his readers with obscenities like *mistikus, audienisma, mentransformasikan, pengkonsenterasian*" (he must have nearly choked on that one). (Salleh Ben Joned 1994:72)

marked by the symbolic [i] that carries the small and weak sense. Thus by incorporating phonetic symbolism into the teaching of Malay proverbs and attempting a finer semantic tuning in the learning of some Malay lexicon one could then provide an alternative in facilitating the understanding and usage of certain proverbs and words in Malay.

The commonest lament among learners is the disfunctioning of their short term memories especially in the immediate moments of examination. One can explore the possibility of engaging the long term memory by capitalising on the poetic properties and phonetic symbolism in language. Language teachers can also consider the effect of rhyming transfiguration to communicate certain messages in Malay. The sound symbolic rhyming phrases perhaps last longer in a student's mind and can be retrieved more easily than non-sound symbolic linguistic items. This in turn facilitates learning. I speculate this to be a fertile ground for research in applied linguistics and psychology.

6. Conclusion

The symbolisation in pantun, proverbs and i-lexicon mentioned are examples of Malay discourses which manifest the Malay aesthetic ideal of *kesesuaian* which includes 'tastes, literary correctness, sense of tradition, restraint, wit and a generally pleasant style' (Muhammad 1991:36). *Kesesuaian* perhaps is similar to the Thai concept of *phayró?* or *phró?* 'the melodious, beautiful, sweet sounding, and tuneless qualities' (Hundak 1990). These poetic Malay genres could be regarded as *nāa fang* 'worth listening' and *sānuk* 'enjoyably pleasant' (ibid.). While the pantun and proverbs manifest wise combination of *cháy thōy kham* 'the use of words' and *kaanlamdāp kham* 'the arrangement of words' (ibid.) the i-lexicon provides a more refined feature of *phró?* at the

phonetic level. Each of them carries a particular symbolic-semantic transfiguration in Malay

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